

Chronicles of a Guilty Conscience

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Summary: The UNSC didn't always fight the Covenant, and their operations weren't always as altruistic or heroic as the good fight against an overwhelming alien force. One NavSpecWar operative finds this out the hard way. COMPLETE

1. Training Op

Prologue: Training Op

****Elysium City****

Private Maya Burton sat crouched in the bushes, and tried to fight the butterflies in her stomach. She knew that this wasn't how a Navy Special Warfare specialist should act, but this was her first official mission.

Well, technically, not an official mission. It was more like a training op, but seeing as this was their final one before completing their training cycle and becoming full-time NavSpecWar personnel, it was close enough.

The mission was pretty simple. The house that they had under surveillance held the target, codename "117". Their objective was to infiltrated the house, obtain the target, and take it back to a pickup point, all without attracting the attention of the public.

THAT was going to be the hard part. The house they were staking out was in the middle of a fairly densely populated neighborhood. Fortunately, mission control found a clever way around that. First, they managed to lure most of the inhabitants away on a bogus community meeting. Then, just in case there were any witnesses left behind, another NavSpecWar team would cut the power to the entire neighborhood. This would serve as a cover for their insertion. Their vehicle was disguised as a maintenance van, and would pull up to the target house.

"Eye in the sky here. Subjects have left the building. Front door is open, I repeat, front door is open."

Through the walls of the van, Maya could hear a car zoom past.

"Confirmed. Back door is open as well."

Maya sat up. That was their mission leader, a Chief Mendez, and he had just given the confirmation code. That meant the mission was go.

"Move in! And remember, 117 is to be taken intact. Any damage, you and you can kiss your damn careers goodbye!"

The dozen or so NavSpecWar operatives nodded in agreement. Mendez raised his hand, and began counting down with his fingers. The moment his last one came down, he kicked the door to the van open.

At the same exact moment, several residential city blocks turned black as coal.

Maya and her squadmates piled out of the van. To keep the darkness from hampering their movement and coordination, they were equipped with nightvision and thermal goggles. The operatives moved and took position around key areas of the house, cutting off any potential avenues for escape. Maya and a fellow operative took up positions at the front door.

"Breach on my mark! Mark!"

Simultaneously, windows and doors were broken down and the operatives poured in, sweeping every corner of the house.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Damn! Where's the target?"

"Checking the second story."

Maya crept up the stairs and peered down the second floor hallway. From their pre-mission briefing, she already knew where the target's room was. She crept down the hallway, pistol raised. Unlike actual guns, however, these pistols were modified to be nonlethal weapons. Unfortunately, due to the close quarters, they couldn't use stun rounds, so they instead opted for small, subsonic darts that would deliver a small and nonlethal electric shock.

"Now where are you?"

Maya slowly inched the door open and peeked inside. Nothing. Slowly, Maya inched further into the room and took a closer look at her surroundings. The room was fairly common for what you would see a six-year old living in. The wallpaper was adorned with spaceships,

stars, planets, and all sorts of other astronomical bodies, giving the room a very surreal look. Everywhere, toys of every kind and shape were scattered about, and there were many items related to some very wildly popular Saturday morning cartoons. Besides that, though, the room was pretty much empty. No 117. Maya took out her radio.

"Second floor cle-"

Before she could finish her sentence, however, Maya stopped and listened more carefully. She could hear something in the room, something alive, as it was _breathing_. The sound was coming straight from the closet.

"Wait, target is on the second-"

Suddenly, the closet on her right side burst open. Maya only had enough time to face the black silhouette leaping out at her. The black shape slammed into her chest, and Maya could feel herself falling backward. She toppled to the floor, scattering toys and other knicknacks around, and she felt her chest being compressed. Suddenly, the pressure on her chest relieved, and Maya only had enough air to blurt out on her radio.

"Target is loose on the second floor!"

As May lay on the ground, trying to regain her breath, she could hear the radio chatter of her squadmates.

"There he is!"

"Grab him!"

"Crap! The little bugger bit me!"

"He's getting away!"

"Don't have a clear shot! Simmons, cut him off!"

"On it!"

"Watch out, this kid's tougher than he looks!"

Maya finally managed to pull herself to her feet and barrel down the stairs. As she did so, she could see the target rush into what should be the kitchen.

"Target's in the kitchen! Pursuing!"

Maya followed the target into the kitchen, though she quickly lost track of his position. In the dark, it was difficult to see, but Maya _did_ hear metal scraping against wood.

Great, the last thing I need now is to get carved up by a scared six-year old with a kitchen knife.

There was a crash of pots and pans, and Maya instinctively whirled around to check the sound, but knew it was a mistake. She turned back around, and saw that same silhouette charging her. This time, though, Maya was prepared. She raised her pistol and fired. The dart imbedded

itself into the target. There was crackle of electricity, a scream of pain, and then the target ran back out of the kitchen, where Maya's squadmates piled on top of him, though this was far from over.

The resulting scuffle resulted in wounding every member on the team in one way or another. Most suffered from bruises and scratches from the wild punches and kicks the target threw, though several more were nursing broken fingers when they tried to take away a small metallic token from him. Maya, fortunately, managed to grab the little item without any serious injury. She glanced at it, and noticed that it was a quarter. An ancient coin used in the 21st century. How did this kid obtain one? Maya thought about keeping it as a memento, but thought against it, and decided to turn the thing to Mendez. He should know what to do with it.

"Good job team. Mission accomplished, though it appears you didn't get away unscathed."

"You're telling me. The little bugger gave quite a fight."

"Took all twelve of us to pin him down long enough to administer that tranquilizer."

"Uhhh, Chief Mendez? Sir?"

Mendez turned around to face Maya.

"What is it, Private?"

"Our op in there made a little mess, we were wondering if-"

"Don't worry. ONI is sending in a clean team right now. By the time the parents return, they won't notice a thing. Your job is done, Private. We can take it from here."

"Yes sir."

As Mendez and his men left, Maya turned to her squad leader, Sergeant Fleming.

"Sir, this was supposed to be a training op, right?"

"That's right. Why?"

"How come it doesn't feel like one?"

That question would haunt Maya's dreams for the rest of her life.

2. Black Ops

Chapter 1: Black Ops

Planet Sepheril, Aeegan System, Outer Colonies

Zion City

"Today, Sepharil will have voice! Today, Sepharil shall throw off the weight of oppression! Today, we will be free!"

The growing crowd around Minister Jorgen's podium began to cheer. The Minister's stirring words, and striking charisma was gathering followers by the thousands.

"They never make it a challenge!"

Maya Wellings propped her TL-7 rifle on a crate, and zeroed in her sights. After checking her equipment, she took out a radio.

"Longbow is ready."

A series of acknowledgements from other team members came in as well.

"Eye in the sky is ready."

"Eagle's Nest is ready."

"Snoop and Scoot is ready."

"Control is ready. SILENCER is go."

Maya checked her rifle to see if it was loaded, and waited for the perfect moment!

The man she was aiming at was Minister Gabriel Jorgen. He was a famous religious figure on several Outer Colony worlds, and has garnered quite a lot of power for himself. It was no secret that Jorgen was viciously anti-UNSC, and it was suspected that several very large and very damaging terrorist attacks were made in his name. Unfortunately, there was no evidence linking Jorgen to any of these attacks, so he continued utilizing the UNSC's right of freedom of speech, hopping from planet to planet and "spreading the word." Obviously, the UNSC was not very happy with letting a man like Jorgen waltzing around the Outer Colonies drumming up support for his cause, so they called upon their trump card.

The ONI Black Ops division, aka, the Shadow Squad.

Officially, the Black Ops division of ONI was formed as a "counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency task force", but their activities went far deeper than that. It was the sort of unit the UNSC would use to do some very dirty work, without getting any grime on its hands. They ran the whole gamut of things, ranging from intrusion, reconnaissance, espionage, and assassination. The only difference was, if a Black Ops member was ever killed or captured and identified, the UNSC would deny any knowledge of them. Basically, if you were caught, you never existed.

Often a great motivator to get the job done.

Maya sighed. Another routine assassination. Ho-hum. As with all Black Ops operations, it was imperative that the UNSC not be implicated or associated with any of its actions if they were made public.

That was why Maya was wearing civilian clothes and a civilian weapon to hide the fact that this was a military op. Her clothes were matched to the usual attire of the natives of Seraphil, and her weapon, the TL-7, was a rifle known to be used by a hard-line and

extremist organization that often jockeyed with Jorgen for recruitment rights. It also happened that this organization was both anti-religious AND anti-UNSC as well.

What a mess the UNSC is in.

Maya centered her sights over Jorgen's head. She compensated for distance and windspeed, and kept her crosshairs on him. She resisted the urge to pull the trigger. She was on strict orders to fire only during a specific moment in his speech.

"For too long, the UNSC has put us under its heel! Now it is time to fight back! For the power of God is with us all!"

"Can we just shoot him already? This crackpot is starting to get on my nerves."

"Five bucks she gets him on the first shot."

"You're on."

Maya frowned at her squadmates' seemingly immature behavior. _They_ never had to do any of the actual shooting.

Then, Jorgen brought his hands up, and raised his head in silent prayer, as if asking God for deliverance. He was going to get it alright, since in several seconds, Jorgen would have the chance to ask God personally for it.

"This is Control. Longbow, you are clear to fire."

Without hesitation, without doubt, without remorse, and without any consideration to the target whatsoever, Maya pulled the trigger of her TL-7 and fired.

3. Escape Route

Chapter 2: Escape Route

Planet Sepheril, Aeegan System, Outer Colonies

Zion City

Jorgen's head disappeared in a cloud of red haze, and his body toppled to the floor. People began to scream and scatter, and a pair of bodyguards hopped onto the stage and ran to the minister's aid. Already, people directly below Maya's position began frantically pointing up at where they heard the gunshot come from, but everybody was too busy trying to get out of the line of fire to listen.

Maya checked her watch. In briefing, it was estimated that it would take approximately two minutes for local authorities to respond. Maya had to ditch the weapon, wipe any evidence of ONI involvement, and escape the building.

Simple.

First, she backed off from the window, wrapped her rifle in swathes of cloth, and hid it under a pile of cardboard boxes. Next, she

dropped an incendiary device, timed at exactly one minute, to remove any traces of fibers or DNA. Finally, after making sure everything was in order, Maya opened the door and barreled down the stairs. It was too risky to use the elevator, since it could be stopped.

"Longbow, this is Eye in the Sky. Recommend you find a different route out. Police have arrived sooner than planned. Repeat, police have already arrived. Your exit route is compromised."

Maya cursed under her breath. That would make things more complicated. Sanders was outside waiting. With her most direct route cut off, she had to go around, which would take longer.

"Recommend you take the back door, Longbow. Not much activity there."

"Roger that."

Maya began to pick up her pace a little, and made a beeline for the maintenance door. That would lead to the rear of the building and-

"Excuse me, ma'am."

Maya froze and turned. Two men in police uniforms came to confront her.

"Sorry to disturb you, miss, but we were wondering if you heard anything out of the ordinary."

Good, they still didn't suspect her. Maya feigned confusion and answered.

"Yeah, I thought I heard something popping, like a gunshot or something like that!"

Both policemen quickly grew more alert.

"Where?"

"I think it was somewhere upstairs."

One of the policemen nodded. One made a dash to cover the stairs and the elevator, while the other got on the radio. Maya turned to leave, but was stopped short.

"Hold on there, miss. We can't let anybody leave the building, not until we've cleared it."

Definitely NOT good. Maya was the only person in the building, and once they found the rifle, it wouldn't be too hard to make put two and two together.

"Longbow, this is Control, what is your status? Confirm!"

Thankfully, the radio was a small transmitter fitted into her ear, so only Maya could hear it. She inched her mouth toward the transmitter in her collar

"Hit a snag, sir. Held up by locals. They haven't caught on yet, but they won't let me leave."

"Well by god then, FIND a way! Every second you waste is another second the enemy can use!"

"Yes sir."

Fortunately, the policeman's back was turned toward her, so Maya tried to take the chance to inch away toward the maintenance door, until she felt a hand land on her shoulder.

"And where do you think you're-"

In a blur of motion, Maya's fist connected with the policeman's face. The policeman staggered back, and tried to draw his pistol, but Maya quickly delivered two more punches into his gut. The man grunted and fell over. Ignoring the cries from the other policeman to stop, Maya opened the maintenance door and ran through.

"Longbow, this is Eye in the Sky. We've got contacts all over. Police units centering in on your location. Estimated time, ETA 30 seconds!"

Maya opened another door and burst into a back alley. She quickly glanced around and dashed to the nearest street. Already, police sirens and lights were appearing on the opposite side of the alley.

"Contacts behind you! Closing in fast!"

"I'm aware they're after me, damn it! Find me a way out of this mess!"

"Uhhh, keep going down. There's a side alley right across the street. Go into it and take a left."

Maya burst out from the alley. Carelessly shoving aside pedestrians, two police cars roared down the street to cut her off.

"Persistent bastards."

Maya kept running. Once both cars stopped, Maya jumped and slid across the hood of one of the cars. Landing on her feet, she made a beeline for the next alley, but she could already hear car doors opening behind her and pistols clearing leather holsters. She ignored the hails for her to stop and kept running.

Suddenly, she heard shots, and then she stumbled as if she had been hit in the side with a sledgehammer. Maya winced in pain and kept moving. She reached the alley and turned in to it. Now the policemen couldn't get a good shot in at her.

As she ran down the alley, Maya reached down and felt her side. There was a small, but noticeable hole in the side of her jacket. Thankfully, she was wearing a kinetic impact vest under it. Though it wouldn't stop a bullet, the vest was strong enough to at least slow it down and deflect it enough so a shot won't be lethal. She probed the hole with her fingers, and they came back wet and bloody. Maya

looked down. Her jacket wasn't soaked with blood yet, and she didn't really feel much pain, so she assumed the wound wasn't that serious.

She then spied a door on her right. She quickly threw it open and ran inside. She found herself inside a diner, which was packed with people eating breakfast. That was good, since it would be harder to spot her in the crowd.

Outside, dozens of police officers and an armada of cars and lights raced past the diner window. Several patrons looked up to see what the commotion was, but most didn't do so much as bat an eye, as if such events were a common occurrence. Maya leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. She made it. This time.

"Hey miss, you going to stand there, or are you going to buy something?"

Maya snapped her eyes open, remembering that she still had to meet up with her extraction team. She turned to face the slightly portly cook behind the counter.

"N-no, that's okay."

Then, another employee, a kid really, came up.

"Hey, you know what that commotion was all about? I heard someone got shot or something."

Maya managed to give a thin smile.

"Don't worry. Nothing special has happened here. Never has, never will."

With those words, Maya opened the door, looked both ways, and disappeared into the Sepherilian morning haze.

4. Mail Call

AU: Yes, I know this chapter is somewhat short, but it's sort of an introductory chapter of sortsâ€¦

Chapter 3: Mail Call

Reach

This was ONI Installation 536 located on Reach. For Maya and her NavSpecWar team, this was home in between missions, and thankfully, there weren't very many of them. The base was pretty standard, with bunkers, hangars, fixed defenses, and a full complement of Marines. But since this was also an ONI owned and run base, it also had a certain level of creature comforts not seen in normal Marine bases, such as more private rooms, larger recreational areas, and more downtime in which to use them.

From Maya's original squad of twelve men, six were left. It was also to the point where none of them really used their real names during duty, as most of them used self appointed callsigns to protect their identities. Maya's callsign was Longbow, for her skill with a rifle

and her tendency to do most of the killing. There was also Cutter, the demo expert, Wonder Boy, the techie, Jonesin and Audie, your bread and butter special forces, Maverick, the headcase, and Wolfman, the team leader. All had their individual skills and personalities, and they were like family to each other. Also, Wolfman always had to give his customary speech after every successful mission.

"People, I would like to commend Longbow here for being the crack shot she always is!"

"You're damn right."

"And for the rest of you who also did your individual duties. Because of our successful mission, ONI has seen fit to actually give us our mail for once."

He smiled at the collective cheers of his squad.

"That's right. You can find what you need at the postal station, and by UNSC regulation, I have to remind you to fill out your wills, which most of you slackers still haven't gotten around to doing."

As Maya walked back from the post station, she sifted through the disks she had received while she was gone. Most of them were either bills, or junk mail. Some things just never changed. What she was really looking for, though, was a small data disk from her husband and two daughters.

Maya smiled as she recalled how she met Edward Wellings, under quite odd circumstances. It was several years back during a shore leave on Reach. On leave, there were certain kinds of UNSC etiquette to be followed. Officers stuck with officers, enlisted men with other enlisted men, and generally, it was better for the Marines and Navy people to stay out of the same city. To combat this, a lot of businesses and bars that catered to UNSC personnel strictly enforced the "no rank" policy. Any UNSC officer or enlisted man had to take off all rank badges, stripes, medals, or any other decoration that would declare their status, and deactivate their IFF tags if they wanted to get service. It was because of that Maya had no way of knowing her future husband was a Navy captain, and he had no idea she was a black ops agent for ONI.

Maya wasn't quite sure what their two daughters Karla and Samantha would become, though even at their young age, both girls seemed to show an extreme interest in the Marines they saw from the surrounding bases. No surprise to that.

It was at that moment Audie burst in, out of breath.

"New mission. We have to get to the briefing room. Now."

5. An Ordinary Day's Work

AN: Well, you are all lucky today. Thanks to my current mood, position of the moon, and time of day, I've decided to give this fic a long overdue update.

Chapter 4: An Ordinary Day's Work

**Reach **

"It's good to see you all here." Major Finn said as he saw the squad file in.

Though Wolfman was technically in command of Shadow Squad, Major Finn was in charge in terms of organizing missions and logistics, as well as being the ONI liaison. Unfortunately, like many ONI officers, Major Finn was more of a desk jockey than an actual field operative, so after the mission briefing, they would never see Finn again until they returned to base. However, they would still remain in radio contact with him, which only served to have Finn give them generally unhelpful or inaccurate advice.

"Alright, since we're all here lets get straight to the briefing." Finn activated the room's holoprojector, filling the center of the briefing room with the transparent image of one of many planets in UNSC space.

"This is Cesan III." Finn continued. "There have been reports of recent insurgent activity here. Our intelligence has investigated further, and we have found out that the insurgents, calling themselves the Scarlet Soldiers, have taken control of an abandoned UNSC facility near the city of Gotha."

The image immediately zoomed in to a large cityscape with a series of mountains just north of it. Red squares marked out areas of interest, and were all concentrated on various points in the mountains.

"Gotha is a subterranean military base, with eighty percent of its facilities being underground."

The image suddenly shifted to show the base's layout under the mountains.

"Obviously, the Scarlet Soldiers are anti-UNSC and have gathered a rather large stockpile of weapons. Our intelligence believes that they may even have nuclear warheads in their arsenal."

The air in the room suddenly became very serious. Second only to magnetic accelerator cannons, nuclear weapons were the most destructive weapons known to exist.

"Sir." Jonesin raised his hand. "If the base is abandoned and decommissioned, why can't we just bombard it from space? A few MAC rounds and the entire mountain range will be rubble."

"There's a problem with that method." Finn sighed. "The Scarlet Soldiers also managed to reactivate the ground-based MAC cannons defending the facility. Any ship trying to get in bombardment range will risk being heavily damaged or destroyed. And remember, this op is supposed to be quiet. People will ask questions if MAC rounds start falling out of the sky."

"Then how do we get inserted?" Audie asked. "If ships can't get close, that means we won't be able to use drop pods."

"Simple. You'll be inserted via Pelican in a high altitude high opening jump."

Finn smiled at the collective grimaces of the squad. High altitude jumps were a very dangerous and extremely harrowing experience. Hell, even atmospheric drop pods were safer, since they provided oxygen and protection from the atmospheric temperatures.

"In addition to the three ground based MACs, the facility is also armed with numerous anti-aircraft batteries and radar. Fortunately, none of these systems were designed for individual paratroopers in mind. Nobody should know that you're even coming, and if they do, there's not much that's going to be able to hit you."

"What's the estimated troop strength?" Wolfman always asked that question.

"Unknown. Surveillance of the site and the supplies being shipped in puts an estimate of about seven hundred hostiles, including troops and support staff."

The hologram changed again showing a more detailed view of the facility.

"Once you land and reach the rendezvous point, you'll enter the base through this unused utility tunnel. After that, your objectives are to find and destroy the nuclear warheads, and override the fusion reactor safeties."

"Sir?" Maya cocked her head in curiosity. Anything that involved the words "fusion", "override", and "safeties" in the same sentence was bound not to have very good consequences.

"In order to ensure that base cannot be used by the insurgents, we have to overload the base's fusion reactor. First, it will cut off the base's main power supply and render all of its primary systems useless. Second, the resulting explosion will destroy enough of the facility that it would be impractical to try and make it operational again."

"Sir, what about the civilians?"

"Well, I'm not bringing any, are you?"

Maya growled as her squadmates snickered at Finn's joke. She was often at the butt end of many jokes due to her reluctance in involving civilians in military matters.

"Okay, seriously, none of the civilians in Gotha should be harmed. Since the facility is deep underground, the mountains will contain the blast. The worst that can happen are some minor landslides and earthquakes. We also have a lot of deniability. The existence of the old UNSC base near Gotha is no secret to the citizens, and neither is the existence of the Scarlet Soldiers. It would be easy to imply that a bunch of ragtag terrorists didn't know how to properly manage a simple fusion reactor."

"But they aren't just simple, ragtag terrorists, are they?" Maya narrowed her eyes. "Standard UNSC procedure on base retirement is that they remove any and all components vital to the operation of primary base systems, such as files, AI cores, weapons, electronics, fusion reactors, and MAC components. How is it that a bunch of

revolutionary kids with guns can renovate an entire UNSC base to full capacity?"

Finn seemed to hesitate for a moment before replying.

"We've become aware to the fact that the Scarlet Soldiers have been receiving outside help. Theories range from sympathetic UNSC personnel to assistance from the larger and more organized insurgent groups. However, all of that is being handled by another department and is not our concern at the moment."

Maya leaned back in her seat and sighed. It was ONI's typical habit of informing their troops the bare minimum that needed to be known.

"Additional information, such as rally points, areas of interest, and extraction can be found in the briefing files being uploaded to your personal uplinks. Get ready to pack up and move out. We're leaving at 0800 hours." Finn concluded.

Over the skies of Gotha, Cesan III: Two Days Later

Maya sat quietly in the cabin of the Pelican. The entire interior was tinted red from the internal lighting, a sign that they were nearing the drop point. Her squadmates were similarly silent. Nobody really talked before an insertion unless it was to confirm safety and gear. It was something of a superstition not to talk or joke before an insertion, lest you suffer an unfortunate end before you even saw the first bullet fly. Maya personally didn't like or buy into superstition, but if it kept troops sane and focused, she had no problems.

"Reaching the drop point in one minute." The pilot announced.

The six squad members began to check their gear, having fellow squadmates check their parachute packs to ensure that they were properly packed.

"Alright! We are over the drop zone!" The pilot yelled, opening the rear hatch. "Hold onto your panties, because you're in for a wild ride!"

The lighting inside the Pelican suddenly shifted from red to green, and Maya could feel the outrush of air as the hatch opened. Fortunately, she couldn't feel the severe cold due to the thick insulation gear she was wearing.

"Go go go!" Wolfman yelled as he leapt out of the Pelican.

The other squad members followed suit, went into freefall for several seconds, and then released their chutes, stacking up so Wolfman led the way. Technically, even though they were in their designated drop point, the actual drop zone was roughly thirty miles away. Not wanting to risk getting picked up by radar, the Pelican dropped them off just out of effective range. The squad would make the rest of the way by parachute, slowly floating down from high altitude until they reached the drop zone. Traditionally, such drops were difficult to coordinate and navigate, but with the advent of advanced and portable navigation systems, parachuting to a specific point was a simple task.

The entire trip felt impossibly long, and there was little to distract them. It was the middle of night, it was cloudy so no stars showed, and they were dropped off at the opposite end of the mountains from Gotha, which meant that the city lights only managed to form a thin outline of the mountains ahead. Occasionally, there was the odd light here and there from an isolated cottage or lonely car driving down the highway. Otherwise, everything was pitch black.

It wasn't long before Maya and her squad made the landing. At first, she was rather hesitant to take off all of the high altitude gear she was wearing. Cesan III was a relatively cold planet, and they were dropped fairly high up in the mountains. However, her practical side quickly took over. Such gear was too bulky to move around in.

However, as she stripped off the gear, her squadmates jokingly whistled and flirted with her.

"Hey May, I'll give you twenty bucks if you take the rest off." Jonesin chuckled.

"Oh, May actually exposing herself? I'd so pay money to see that!" Audie laughed.

"Shut your mouth before I shove a knife into it." Maya growled. She sort of disliked the fact that none of her squadmates called her by her callsign, and instead used her nickname.

What she also disliked was being the only female in a squad of men with nothing better to do than to make her miserable. This was one of those times where she wished she had signed up with the Navy or Marines, whose female/male ratio was considerably higher than ONI's. Maya mentally noted to herself that if she ever got around to writing her will, she would encourage her daughters to join the Navy or Marines instead of ONI. Imagining any of her girls getting stuck in a squad full of asswads like these made her sick to her stomach.

However, squadmates were still squadmates, and even with all their faults, Maya was willing to take a bullet for any of them, and she was sure that they would do the same.

"Shit, can we get inside already, it's freezing out here." Cutter whined, rubbing his gloves together for warmth.

"Alright, let's get moving." Wolfman said quietly.

They prepped their weapons and equipment and began to creep through the forest. The entire squad was armed with MA5C carbines, which were more compact versions of the MA5B assault rifle and could be equipped with suppressors. Maya had her own carbine, as well as her trusty S2AM sniper rifle. Though it probably wouldn't be very practical for the enclosed encounters they were facing, Maya couldn't bring herself to go into an op without it. Besides, you never knew when you might actually need one.

Quietly, Wolfman motioned his squad to stop. They were in front of the hatch leading into utility tunnel they were supposed to breach.

Wonderboy attached a small device which fit perfectly over the hatch's keypad. Maya wasn't an expert in electronics, but figured that the device quickly calculated the door's combination through trial and error.

As if on cue, the device glowed green and the hatch popped open. One by one, the Shadow Squad slowly lowered themselves into the darkness, knowing that the easy stage of their mission had just ended.

6. Unwanted Guests

Chapter 5: Unwanted Guests

Abandoned UNSC Base: Commandeered by insurgents

The utility tunnel was a dark and dank environment. Steam and condensation dripped from countless pipes and the gentle hum of live electrical wires filled the air. The squad slowly moved down the tunnel, careful to avoid any deep puddles that would give away their presence. So far, the tunnel was empty.

"Doesn't look like they bothered to post any guards down here." Jonesin remarked.

"Shut up." Wolfman hissed. "I'm picking something up on the motion sensor."

He pointed straight down the dark hallway. They could hear the familiar sounds of talking and friendly banter, which was loud enough to be heard over the ambient noise of the utility tunnel.

"May, up front and check out who's coming." Wolfman whispered.

Maya nodded and crept forward, carbine at the ready. She pulled down her thermal goggles over her eyes and activated them. The world in front of her suddenly turned into a cacophony of reds, blues, and greens. Right in front of her, she could see two red human shaped blobs slowly walking up the tunnel. It didn't appear that they had any sort of lighting or vision enhancer, which meant that they were going just by their natural night vision.

Perfect

With feline grace, Maya leapt onto a pipe hanging off the ceiling. Wrapping her legs around the pipe, she hung upside down and waited for the two guards to walk right under her.

"I swear, this place gives me the fucking creeps. It's all dark and noisy, and totally disorienting down here. You just know that there's probably something down here waiting to get us." One of the guards complained.

"You watch way too many movies." The other guard coolly replied. "Try to look on the bright side of things. While I'm down here, I'd like to think of myself as the 'Lord of the Sewers'."

"Yeah, you've got no problem with that because you freaking live in one."

"Ah shutup and keep an eye out. The Commander thinks there might be intruders down here."

It was at that moment the guards were directly under Maya. She quickly reached down, grabbed the rear guard's head with both arms and snapped his neck with lightning speed. She then uncurled her legs from the pipe and leapt down the ground just as the lifeless guard slumped over.

"What the?"

The second guard turned around to investigate the sound. Before he knew it, he could see Maya's combat knife sticking out of his throat. He gurgled and fell over like a sack of flour.

Two silent kills in about just as many seconds. Few people could match that.

"All clear." Maya whispered back to her squad.

"Okay, lets dump the bodies and get moving." Wolfman picked up one of the dead guards. "Those drainage grates look like a good place to stash these guys."

With that said, Wonderboy quickly popped off a drainage gate. Wolfman and Jonesin both shoved the bodies down the hole, and after hear a satisfying splash, closed the grate.

"You know, that's gotta be the shittiest job in the world, guarding sewers." Cutter remarked. "I mean seriously, what did these guys have to do to be qualified as the 'Lord of the Sewer'?"

"Did you forget about the concept of stealth?" Wolfman growled. "Be quiet and keep moving."

Following his cue, the rest of the squad silently followed his lead until they reached a sealed door. Jonesin and Audie both took up positions beside the door. Audie slowly grabbed the door's lever and pulled it down with his other hand on his carbine just in case. When the door was unsealed, Jonesin slowly pushed the door open, carbine poking through the crack.

"All clear." He said.

The team quickly filed through the door, covering each side of the hallway as they entered. The hallway was the standard, bland military hallway with uniform lighting, dull gray paint, and colored lines leading to different areas of the base. Wolfman pointed to two of the lines, which indicated the direction to the base's storage bunkers and power generator.

"Alright, me, Audie, and Maverick will go and secure the nukes. The rest of you will make your way to the generator and rig it to blow. If we lose contact, assume that we have been compromised and detonate the generator by any means possible. Oh, and remember, this is a stealth mission. That means no shooting unless you really, really have to."

The rest of the commandos nodded as they split off. It wasn't long before Maya, Cutter, Wonderboy, and Jonesin were alone in the

desolate halls.

Well, not completely alone.

"I'm picking up movement." Wonderboy said as he glanced at his motion sensor. "Three contacts closing fast."

"Over here." Jonesin opened a side door. The team quickly dashed inside.

It wasn't long after they shut the door when they heard sounds of movement and talking. Wonderboy slid a microcamera through the door slit so that the team could have a visual of the enemies. From the looks of it, two of the targets were standard armed soldiers, while the third looked to be some kind of technician or officer. While watching the feed, Maya noticed that true to their name, the Scarlet Soldiers did indeed wear bright red clothing and body armor. It probably did a great job as a symbol and recruiting tool, but it such a bad idea for practical combat Maya had to keep from snorting in disgust.

"They may be terrorists, but they sure know how to dress." Cutter joked.

"Shut up." Jonesin hissed.

"You mean they still haven't reported back in yet?" One of the guards exclaimed.

"No, they haven't checked in, and they won't respond to any of our hails."

"Can it be an attack?"

"No way." The second guard laughed. "You know how the UNSC works. They'd sooner pound this place to rubble with an entire battlefleet than waste the time sending a boatload of Marines in. Besides, if they're coming, we'll be ready."

"But what about-"

"Don't worry. The stupid bastards probably just got lost. They are wandering around the utility tunnels. Plus it doesn't take a Slipspace physicist to figure out that all the crap down there can interfere with radio signals."

"Still, I've got a bad feeling about this. And what about thatâ€| that _thing_ we found? Just what the fuck is it?"

"The greatest find of the century, that's what it is." The technician replied with glee. "I can't believe something thisâ€| momentous could just be lying down here of all places. It was a good thing we raided this base. God knows what the UNSC would have done with it."

Maya made a curious look, wondering what thing they were talking about. Wonderboy quietly shrugged and neither Jonesin nor Cutter could give any answers.

At that point, the Scarlet trio had already moved down the hall but stopped.

"Hold up." The first guard put a finger to his radio earpiece. "It seems like the Commander is pretty jittery about all this. He's ordering us to wait until he can send a full security team with us to check out the tunnels."

Which meant that Maya and her team would be stuck for a while. At least until these guys got moving again. She took the time to start examining the room she was hiding out in. With all of the cleaning equipment and supplies scattered around, Maya assumed that they were in the janitor's storage room. She recognized the sharp smell of disinfectant and cleaner fluid, but there was another, vaguely familiar odor that Maya couldn't quite place her finger on. She tried to recall what it was, but could only conjure up images of old battlefields and missions when she suddenly realized what it was.

It was the smell of death.

Maya quietly shoved a cleaning cart aside, and saw a pile of corpses on the ground. Years of professional killing and assassination kept her from falling backwards and screaming at the top of her lungs, but Maya was still nonetheless shocked at what she saw.

"What the hell?" Jonesin said as he turned to see the bodies.

"They're base personnel" Cutter pointed. "They've got UNSC uniforms on!"

"Zero, this is Jonesin, come in."

Zero was Major Finn's codename for whenever the squad needed to talk to him.

"This is Zero, go ahead Jonesin."

"Sir, we've got dead UNSC personnel here. I thought you said that this base was abandoned."

"It was." Finn said confidently. "What do the bodies look like?"

"They look like technicians and maintenance staff." Maya said, carefully examining the clothing on the bodies.

"They're probably some of the 'inside help' that helped the rebels here rebuild the base."

"Doesn't explain why they're dead." Jonesin growled.

"You know how these organizations work. The less people who know, the less people who can talk. The Scarlet Soldiers probably double-crossed them or killed them once they weren't useful anymore. Complete your mission."

"Anybody else have a bad feeling about this?" Jonesin asked as he shut off his radio.

"Are they contemplating giving us early retirement?"

It was a long held rumor that no black ops team in the UNSC ever got to enjoy quiet retirement. In most cases, if the command felt that a team has stopped being useful, they used a rival blacks ops team to kill off the other in some elaborate cover mission. The old team would definitely get an early retirement, complete with a severance package involving a bullet to the back. However, it was all rumor of course, though with the secretive nature of ONI, who knew?

"Okay, they're gone." Wonderboy said. "We can start moving again."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Maya shivered.

"I do too. Let's just get this done." Jonesin said as he opened the door.

Base Control Center

Scarlet Commander Caleb Mogran scowled as he read over the security reports. Though he had a sizeable force, the vast majority were not properly trained or very experienced. The result was shoddy performance in the lower echelons of his command. So far, two of his soldiers had disappeared without a trace and nobody could seem to figure out why. Mogran had put all of his forces on full alert, but most of them were concentrated on the lowest levels of the base, trying to find anything else of value.

He knew that the UNSC would come back to retake their precious base. How or with what Mogran didn't know, but he sure as hell wouldn't let them take it without a fight. He was also expecting reinforcements from several cells in the morning, increasing his troop count to over a thousand armed men. All Mogran had to do was last the night.

Easier said than done.

Storage Bunker B

Wolfman slowly crept into the base's underground storage bunker. According to the mission briefing, this was the area the nukes were being held. He made a quick scan of the building and was relieved to see that there wasn't anybody inside. He moved deeper into the bunker, with Audie and Maverick covering his flanks.

"I don't like this." Maverick muttered. "There's something wrong here."

"Stop worrying." Wolfman bent down to check a cargo crate. "You're always saying- oh fuck."

"What?" Audie turned around.

"Get the hell out of here! It's a fucking trap!" Wolfman yelled as gunfire suddenly filled the room.

Fusion Reactor: Outer Core

All things considered, Maya thought that things were going fairly well right now. She and her team had managed to elude most of the Scarlet patrols. They had gotten this far and only had to leave about

six or so dead bodies hidden throughout the base.

"How are things going on that security door?"

"These things aren't meant to be opened." Wonderboy growled. "It's going to take a while to circumvent the door's safeguards."

"Can't we just blow it up?" Cutter asked eagerly. "We haven't blown up anything yet."

"Hell no!" Wonderboy continued to work on the door. "The last thing we need to do is accidentally breach the core and cause a premature overload."

"Why aren't we just doing this from the convenience of the reactor control room?" Jonesin asked.

"Because unlike the actual reactor, the control room will be heavily guarded. With the radiation levels, high voltages, and delicate machinery, not many people will hang around here for long."

"Waitâ€| radiation?" Jonesin said nervously.

"Don't worry, it's only faint background stuff. Nothing permanent."

"Wait, I think I'm getting something. I think it might be Wolfman" Maya said as she tried to increase the volume of her radio.

There was a burst of static, with bits and pieces of frantic talking in between, but Maya could not make out what was being said. However, she did hear the last word quite clearly.

"Ambush!"

7. Early Retirement

Chapter 6: Early Retirement

Base Control Center

Commander Mogran panicked slightly when he heard the frantic calls for help and reinforcements flooding all of the communication channels. From what he was seeing, there was heavy fighting occurring near the storage bunkers on the lower levels of the base. However, there was some sort of jamming or interference, which was hampering his ability to communicate with his forces.

Mogran picked up his personal sidearm, an old M6D pistol, and nodded to several of his bodyguards. The elite troopers quickly realized what was going on and armed their weapons.

"Captain Dellings, you have command of the base." Mogran strode out of the control center with his guards. "I will handle this matter personally."

Storage Bunker B

"Shit, we're pinned down!" Audie cried as he ducked behind a cargo

crate.

Wolfman growled as he reloaded his carbine. He had no idea how many enemies there were, but from their accuracy and tactics, he knew that these were highly trained veterans, contrary to what Finn portrayed the Scarlet Soldiers to be.

"Maverick! We need some intel!"

Maverick nodded and pulled two small objects out of his belt. Once was a fragmentation grenade while the other was a small sticky camera. Maverick lobbed the fragmentation grenade first. Wolfman could hear a pause in the gunfire and shouting before a loud bang. When he was sure the enemies were scattered, Maverick lobbed the sticky camera out. They checked the camera feeds and winced as Wolfman cursed.

"Shit, we gotta get out of here!" He yelled. "Warn Maya and the others!"

"Can't! I can't get a signal through!" Audie cried as more bullets flew over his head.

Wolf-man quickly looked around to find a possible exit. Unfortunately, there was only one way out of the bunker, and that was the door. Wolfman looked to the other side of the bunker and saw cargo lifter unit. It was one of those failed attempts at creating combat practical power armor that was relegated to cargo lifting duty. Though not rated for combat, Wolfman felt it was good enough to suit their needs.

"Audie! Maverick! Give me some covering fire!" Wolfman yelled as he dashed for the cargo lifter.

He pulled himself into the power armor and quickly started to activate the systems, nervously aware of the bullets bouncing off the suit around him. The power lifter slowly began to move. By this time, the enemy soldiers finally got the idea to start firing at Wolfman. However, Wolfman had anticipated this and used the lifter's massive claws to pick up a steel cargo container, using it as a makeshift shield.

"Let's get out of here!" Wolfman yelled as the power lifter slowly lumbered forward.

Maverick and Audie quickly took positions on the power lifter's flank, firing at their assailants behind the protection of their mobile barrier.

"Yes!" Audie cheered as he saw several fall over. "Got the bas-"

Unfortunately, Audie never had a chance to finish his sentence. Several high powered rifle rounds burst through his ballistic armor and into his chest, killing him instantly.

"Keep going!" Wolfman yelled to Maverick. "He's gone!"

Wolfman looked on in horror as he saw the bunker door begin to close. Thinking quickly, he tossed the cargo container he was holding aside,

scattering a squad of soldiers. With just seconds to spare, he managed to slip the power lifter's claws underneath the door and hold it up.

"Go!" He yelled to Maverick.

"You first!" Maverick yelled back. "I'll cover you!"

Wolfman got out of the power lifter, leaving the controls on automatic to keep the door up. He rolled through the opening and came up to his knees, scanning the hallway for any threats.

"Come on Maverick!"

"You keep going sir! I'll hold em back for you!" Maverick yelled over the gunfire.

"Don't be crazy! You'll die!"

"To tell the truth, I've always wanted to go down in a hail of gunfire!" Maverick flashed his fiendish grin. "This one's for Audie!"

"Damnit Maverick!" Wolfman was about to reach under the door and pull him through, but he was too late.

Maverick shot out the power lifter's hydraulic arms, causing them to lose power and drop the doors.

"I regret nothing sir!" He yelled as the door slammed shut. "Go and warn Maya and the others! They've got more to lose than either of us!"

Wolfman cursed loudly to himself and ran down the hallway, gunfire still echoing through the door. Even with the door closed, Wolfman could hear Maverick shout, "I regret nothing!"

Meanwhile, back in the bunker, Maverick was observing his predicament. He was surrounded by at least two dozen soldiers. Outgunned, outnumbered, Maverick was not going down without a fight. He picked up Audie's dropped carbine with one hand and his own carbine in the other, pointing them both at the oncoming soldiers.

"Say hello to my little friends, you fuckers!"

The battle only lasted for five minutes, but the damage was done. Once the shooting finally stopped, Maverick had used up nearly three hundred rounds of ammunition, two carbines, three pistols, five grenades, and a combat knife to kill ten of the estimated two dozen attackers. Maverick himself took at least seven wounds to various parts of his body before he was finally felled by a point blank shotgun blast to the back.

His last word was "Bang." Before he drew a concealed pistol from his boot and shot his attacker in the gut.

Fusion Reactor

"Are you guys going to be finished any time soon?" Maya asked

impatiently, anxious from Wolfman's final transmission.

"Almost done." Wonderboy said as he hacked into the reactor systems.
"Just a few more seconds."

"I'm afraid that it's really not necessary." A familiar voice said confidently from the door.

Maya quickly whipped around, carbine raised and gaped in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Storage Bunker B

Commander Mogran and his troops slowly entered the bunker, weapons drawn. He glanced around and saw signs of a fight. Bullet casings, weapon damage, and bodies littered the entire room. What made Mogran even more suspicious was the fact that he didn't have any troops posted in this area.

As his men scattered to search the rest of the bunker, Mogran bent down to inspect one of the bodies. They were all dead, just as he expected. What he didn't expect was all the bodies to be UNSC soldiers.

However, before Mogran could have any choice to voice his alarm, gunfire and yelling suddenly erupted all over the bunker. Mogran instinctively ducked as two of his bodyguards were cut down by precise rifle fire. His remaining troops quickly returned fire at the unseen assailants. Mogran hazarded a peek out from the cargo crate he was taking cover behind and saw roughly a dozen men firing from a defensive position in a very well-disciplined manner. His remaining men returned fire, but most of it was ineffectual at best.

Focusing on a shape in the darkness, Mogran drew his pistol and fired. He was satisfied to see a human silhouette suddenly jerk and fall over.

"Commander!" Dellings yelled through the radio, robbing Mogran of his feeling of momentary triumph. "We're receiving reports of attacks all over!"

"Impossible!" Mogran shouted. "Scramble our troops!"

"We did sir!" Dellings was frantic now. "But they're all being cut apart! I don't know how long we can- holy shit! They're here!"

The transmission suddenly devolved into shouting and gunfire. Mogran cursed as he cut the transmission.

"All troops fall back! We must secure and protect the reactor!"

Fusion Reactor

"Major Finn?" Maya said incredulously as she lowered her weapon.
"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Just seeing to my assets." Finn said matter-of-factly. "Oh, and you

can put those weapons down. You really won't be needing them any more."

Before Maya or her squadmates had any chance to protest, a dozen black-clad, heavily armed commandoes suddenly entered the room. Seeing that they were grossly outmatched and outnumbered, Maya, Wonderboy, Jonesin, and Cutter reluctantly dropped their weapons to the floor.

"Oh, and don't forget all those concealed weapons of yours as well. I know how all you special forces types work." Fin added.

More weapons clattered onto the ground.

"What the hell is all this about?

"Merely collecting something of great value." Finn nodded to one of the commandoes, who picked up a small lead box from a hidden compartment near the reactor.

The commando then handed the box, which was plastered with warning labels, to Finn. Finn graciously took the box and examined it for a second.

"You're probably wondering why I'm doing this. Unfortunately, I can't be bothered to waste any more time."

"Who the fuck are these clowns?" Jonesin growled.

"Oh? Them?" Finn motioned to the commando squad. "My own little personal army. You won't find them on any official UNSC payrolls though. Now if you'll be so kind, I'll be taking my leave now."

The moment Finn pocketed the mysterious box, one of his men tumbled over. Finn turned to give a harsh reprimand, but it was caught in his throat when he saw the blood spattered all over the floor. Before he could react, Jonesin tackled him to the ground.

Maya took the chance and forcefully elbowed the commando behind her in the face. The man staggered backward, holding onto this broken face. She then brought out a holdout knife she kept hidden in her sleeve and stabbed the commando in the throat, careful not to hit his armored vest. The commando gurgled and fell over. Maya grabbed his rifle and quickly aimed at and shot two more commandoes.

Cutter and Wonderboy similarly brought down their nearby captors in hand-to-hand combat and procured either their own or the enemies' weapons. The remaining commandoes attempted to fight back, but they were all quickly killed by an unseen ally behind them.

"Wolfman!" Maya shouted as she saw him limp into the room. "What the hell happened?"

"We were backstabbed, that's what happened." Wolfman glared at Finn. "By this little piece of shit, and Audie and Maverick paid for it."

Maya and the others gasped. Though they were all used to squadmates being killed in action, one never got used to it.

Wolfman kicked Finn as he lay on the ground. "Okay Finn, we're going to talk, and it will be short, but very very nasty, depending on how you answer."

"Go to hell." Finn spat, only to be rewarded with swift kick to the ribs by Wolfman.

"Now Finn, you know what we can do to forcibly retrieve information from individuals. You've seen us do it. Hell, you've even taught us a few techniques yourself. Do you really want to test us?"

Finn's eyes darted from one soldier to the next and realized that they were all pissed, and all meant business. Now, devious and evil he may be, Finn was not a terribly brave man, and he quickly caved into the pressure.

"Okay, okay, I'll talk." Finn said glumly.

"Then start by telling us what the hell is going on here." Wolfman said.

"Alright, I wasn't completely truthful when I briefed youâ€|"

Jonesin snorted.

"To tell you the truth, this base was never abandoned in the first place. It was just a cover story to conduct secret research."

Maya bent down and picked up the mysterious box from Finn's pocket.

"On this thing, you mean?"

"Don't open that!" Finn said frantically. "You can kill us all!"

Maya raised an eyebrow at the warning and pocketed the box herself.

"What exactly is it?"

"We don't know. It's called the Artifact, and we honestly don't know what it is, what it's for, or what it does. We found it buried under the base in a hidden chamber while attempting to expand the base. All we know is that the Artifact produces huge amounts of radiation and amounts of power that makes even the most advanced fusion reactors look like matches."

"How come it's sitting in a backwater dump like this?"

"It was the only secure place we could keep it. Whenever we tried to move it off planet, it produced massive amounts of radiation, not only in real space, but in Slipspace as well, which meant that it could be tracked if not properly shielded. We sealed it in this shielded box and kept it stored within to reactor to hide its radiation signature."

"It obviously didn't work." Wolfman said wryly.

"I can assure you, the Scarlet Soldiers knew nothing of the Artifact when they attacked the base. They did, however, find it while securing the area, but I doubt those simple-minded fools can truly comprehend what they had in their possession."

"So why all this lying and deception? Why betray us when we could have easily retrieved this?"

"You don't get it, do you?" Finn laughed. "The UNSC isn't the only party interested in the Artifact. There are someâ€|. Individualsâ€| who would like to pay a great deal to have something as rare as this in their personal possession."

"Like your superiors at ONI?" Wolfman narrowed his eyes. "Because I sure as hell know you don't have the guts or the smarts to try and pull something off like this on your own."

Finn grinned. "Besides, we needed a good cover story to explain to the UNSC how such a valuable asset was lost. It would be simple to tell them that a black ops team decided to cash in and went rogue."

"So we were just scapegoats?" Cutter coughed.

"That's right. And who would ever know? UNSC doesn't like to talk about their secret projects much."

"Wonderboy, you have the reactor override codes, right?" Wolfman said grimly.

"Of course I do."

"Tie this bastard up onto the reactor and set it blow in thirty minutes."

"Wait, you can't do this!" Finn yelled.

"Watch me." Wolfman glared, instantly shutting Finn up. "Do it."

"You won't get away with this!" Finn yelled. "There are fifty more of my men in this base, not to mention the Scarlet Soldiers! They know you're here, and you'll never get out of here alive!"

"Gag him too, his voice is starting to annoy me."

"Roger that sir." Maya said enthusiastically as she jammed a cloth into Finn's mouth.

"Now lets get the hell out of here." Wolfman picked up and loaded his weapon. "I'm pretty sure Major Traitor here has a ship ready and waiting to take him off this rock. Plus I'm sure he won't mind if we borrow it."

Finn, unable to move or speak, merely glared at Wolfman.

"Sir, we've got company." Jonesin said as he looked out of the reactor entrance. "Scarlet Soldiers. Twenty at least."

"What do we do sir?" Wonderboy asked.

"We do what we do best." Maya said, with a hint of sadness in her voice. "Kill everything that moves."

8. Skilled Drivers Wanted

Chapter 7: Skilled Drivers Wanted

Fusion Reactor Entrance

Mogran scowled as a grenade pulped three of his men in an instant. Mogran knew that there were only five men holed up inside the reactor, but they were incredibly well trained. Mogran's men were pinned down and were unable or unwilling to try and press forward. Angered with his men's incompetence, Mogran broke cover and charged the reactor, gun blazing. However, before he could get anywhere, the mighty blast doors that sealed off the reactor suddenly shut before his very eyes.

This was not good. Evidently, the intruders had some sort of alternate way out of the facility, since they wouldn't be stupid or desperate enough to seal themselves off in a dead end.

"I want this facility secured to the very last room! Nothing gets in or out! Got that?" He yelled to his troops.

"Yes sir!" The troops shouted. They immediately split up and started forming groups to clear the base.

"I want two platoons of troops ready and waiting in the vehicle bay." Mogran continued. "Do it now!"

The base's vehicle bay was the only real way of getting out of the subterranean facility. If an intruder needed to make a speedy escape, that was the only the place they could go to. Mogran intended to cut them off while he still could.

Coolant Pipe

"You really could have chosen a better way to get us out." Maya grumbled as she crawled through the dark and damp pipe.

"We're not getting shot at, so I'm not complaining." Cutter sighed. "Besides getting to stare at your ass makes it all worthwhile."

There was a sudden yelp of pain as Maya's foot suddenly impacted against Cutter's face.

"Oops, did I do that?" Maya asked venomously.

"Shut up." Wolfman hissed. "Is this really safe, Wonderboy?"

"Well, if we were planning to keep the reactor intact, no." Wonderboy said casually as he crawled. "But since it's being rigged to blow anyways, what's the harm if we don't let it cool down for a few minutes?"

"I suppose you're right." Wolfman agreed. "Are we over the vehicle

bay yet?"

"According to the base schematics, yes."

"Okay. May, you still have the Artifact?"

"Yes sir."

"Hand it over to me really quick."

It was slightly difficult in such a cramped space, but Maya managed to wriggle the small lead box out of her pocket and hand it over to Wolfman, who promptly took the item and began molding C7 plastic explosive around the box.

"What the hell are you doing?" Maya gasped.

"It's insurance, in the event of a worst-case scenario." Wolfman said calmly and handed it back to Maya. "You're in charge of it. I'm notoriously bad at keeping things in my possession."

Maya nervously repocketed the miniature bomb. Hopefully things wouldn't get as bad as being forced to use it.

"Okay, let's do this." Wolfman continued. "Cutter, set some charges down here and get ready to blow this section of pipe and anything below it. We're going down fast and hard and taking whatever can get us off this rock."

Vehicle Bay

Mogran couldn't believe it. Even the vehicle bay was compromised by the mysterious intruders. The moment he and his men had entered, the front ranks of his squad were immediately shot down as roughly fifty black-clad commandoes simultaneously fired. Mogran cursed as he ducked for cover and let his troops move forward.

Mogran knew this had everything to do with that accursed Artifact. He knew that no good would come from such an accursed object. His mind snapped back into focus when a stray round ricocheted and struck the wall inches from his head.

Suddenly, the entire ceiling blew in, collapsing concrete and debris on top of the vehicle bay. Commandoes and Scarlet Soldiers alike dove for cover in an attempt to escape the rain of debris. Through the dust, Mogran could see several dark shapes descend to the ground.

"Cutter!" Wolfman yelled as he leapt into the driver's seat of the nearest Warthog. "Make sure we don't get any pursuit!"

"On it!" Cutter yelled. He pulled out a small, timed C7 charge from his pack and threw it at a line of parked Warthogs. The small explosive device slid across the floor and under the nearest parked vehicle.

The explosion shattered the Warthog like glass, hurling its burning remains into the air for several seconds before crashing back into the ground. Secondary explosions rippled across the vehicle bay as more Warthogs exploded. Men were thrown into the air or torn to

pieces by the force.

Unfortunately, the explosions didn't stop the soldiers from the three sides from firing upon each other. Wolfman cursed as a bullet grazed his arm, cutting a shallow gouge across his bicep. Maya felt a trio of rounds impact her chest. Fortunately, her Kevlar vest and imbedded ceramic armor plate managed to stop the bullets, but did little to ablate the sheer force of being struck by them. She stumbled backwards and was about to fall when Wonderboy caught her.

"You okay?" He asked.

Maya quickly patted her vest and nodded. She then felt a sudden weight fall onto her shoulders. Maya turned, thinking it was an assailant and gasped when she realized it was Wonderboy's dead body. He had been hit with a three-round rifle burst. Two of the rounds penetrated his unarmored neck, while the third had punched through his helmet, instantly killing him. With no time to mourn his death, yet unwilling to just leave his body behind, Maya armed one of the C7 charges on his belt and set it to detonate in thirty seconds.

"May!" Jonesin yelled from the commandeered Warthog. "Let's go!"

Maya charged through the storm of confused gunfire and leapt into the rear of the vehicle. Cutter, manning the mounted chaingun, let loose with a storm of automatic fire. Scarlet Soldier and commando alike ducked, unsure whether the fire was coming from their side or not. Wolfman then gunned the engine to full power, racing for the exit. The Warthog was rocked several times as it rammed and ran down unfortunate soldiers caught in its path.

"Hold on!" Wolfman yelled as the Warthog sped towards the bay doors.

As if on cue, Jonesin emerged from the passenger seat hefting a Jackhammer rocket launcher. There was a loud roar as two rockets freed themselves from their launch tubes and sped toward the massive doors. The high explosive rockets impacted against the steel bay doors and cracked open a tear. Though the hole wasn't large enough for the Warthog to fit through, it weakened the bay doors enough to the point where the vehicle could ram straight through it without suffering significant damage.

"Alright, once we hit the city, we'll go to ground, and we'll be home free." Wolfman said as the Warthog sped down the treacherous mountain road. "We'll get rid of that crystal and disappear. Just like we planned if something like this happened."

"Shit, I hear something." Jonesin cocked his head. "Behind us!"

Suddenly, two dark shapes shot over the mountain behind them and started closing in at an amazing speed. Maya squinted at the shapes. She had much sharper vision than her squadmates and immediately discerned what the objects were.

"Harpies!" She screamed.

Harpies were basically the leaner, meaner gunship variants of the

Pelican dropship. There was no passenger compartment to save weight. Where the cargo claw was supposed to be was a belly-mounted turret sporting a 50mm Gatling cannon capable of firing up to 4,000 armor piercing rounds a minute. All other free space was devoted to missile racks, rocket pods, and a nose mounted 20mm anti-personnel cannon. They basically specialized in hunting down and destroying enemy vehicles, such as runaway Warthogs.

"Fuck." Wolfman muttered as he realized that.

The twin Harpies' cannons lit up like candles as they spat hundreds of armor piercing rounds. Wolfman swerved and weaved along the road as bullets shattered the pavement around him. Cutter returned fire, but the Warthog's 30mm autocannon seemed paltry compared to the thunderous amount of firepower the Harpies could throw.

"Why don't they fire their missiles?" Jonesin wondered. "They can take us out with just one shot!"

"They still want this!" Maya patted the small box in her vest pocket. "They're not going to risk blowing it up!"

"Well, that's one point for us, I guess." Cutter remarked as he kept a stream of bullets flying at the Harpies.

One of the tailing Harpies shot a laser guided missile. The projectile shot over their heads and slammed into the base of a tree down the road. The tree's base splintered into flaming wood chips and the once proud tree began to teeter as it began to fall across the road.

"Step on it!" Jonesin yelled.

Wolfman gritted his teeth as he put the engine to full power. Unfortunately, the Warthog was not designed for acceleration or top speed in mind. To the remnants of the black ops squad, it felt as if the Warthog was crawling its way down the street.

Meanwhile, the Harpies tried to slow the Warthog down by firing across its path. However, Wolfman ignored the fire and kept driving straight. The Warthog managed to just barely clear the obstacle, the tree falling just inches from the vehicle's tail lights.

"We need to get those things off our backs!" Wolfman yelled.
"Jonesin! How many rockets you got left?"

"Enough!"

Jonesin stood up, hefting his rocket launcher and fired. The twin rockets spiraled towards the oncoming Harpies. Both gunships swerved out of the way, but only one managed to evade the missile aimed at it. The second tried to veer out of the way but the rocket slammed into its tail section, snapping it off like a twig. Though not destroyed, the Harpy lost its maneuverability for a few seconds, which was long enough for Cutter to draw a bead on it with his 30mm cannon. Bullets riddled the Harpy's cockpit, instantly killing the crew within. With no intelligence at the controls, the second Harpy veered to the side and slammed into the mountain below it.

Jonesin tossed the rocket launcher over the side and said, "Now I'm

out."

"That still leaves the other one." Wolfman said.

Suddenly, the sound everybody dreaded the most reached their ears. It was the clicking of a weapon that had just run out of ammo. Cutter looked down at the 30mm cannon, horrified to see that the ammo belt had run out and that the gun was no longer firing any bullets. Now there was nothing left to keep the Harpy at bay.

The Harpy, emboldened by the death of its partner and the lack of fire coming from the Warthog, began to close in.

"Do we have anything left?" Wolfman asked.

"No!" Jonesin replied as he dug through the Warthog's cargo compartments.

"We've got assault rifles, don't we?"

"If you want to annoy them, then yes!"

"We still have one thing that can take it down." Maya said.

"What are you talking about?" Cutter asked.

Maya unslung her sniper rifle and sighted it on the Harpy.

"S2AM rounds are rated to pierce spacecraft windows and armor, which is why their use is prohibited on spacecraft and stations. If I can hit the right spotâ€|"

Maya switched on her scope's nightvision function and tried to aim it at the magic spot over the Harpy's cockpit. Fortunately for her, the Harpy pilot was cocky and didn't bother trying to maneuver, which made aiming far easier than it should have been. She tried to tune out the thunderous roar and the flash of the Harpy's cannons as she zeroed on the target. Finally, everything in body, even her heart, paused for a brief second, telling her to take the shot.

Maya pulled the trigger.

Through her scope, she could see the Harpy's windshield crack and spatter as it vainly attempted to stop the armor-piercing sabot round. Something exploded from within, covering the interior of the cockpit with blood. The Harpy shuddered and swung off course, clipping a tree and then nosediving into the road behind the Warthog. However, it managed to fire a single missile before crashing, and it was headed straight for the Warthog.

Wolfman caught side of the incoming missile and swerved to avoid it. Unfortunately, he was only half successful. The missile hit just feet from the Warthog's rear left tire. The blast sent the Warthog spinning and it flipped over the edge of the road.

Maya, who was not strapped onto the Warthog, suddenly found herself in the air, as if she were floating. The feeling lasted for several seconds until she what she assumed was the ground. Then she didn't feel anything else.

9. Backdoor Deal

Chapter 9: Backdoor Deal

Solorai Mountains

Maya groaned as she slowly got up from the ground. Pain shot through her entire body as bruised and broken body parts screamed in agony. From what she felt, Maya deduced that she had several broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and a minor fracture in her right leg. She didn't even want to guess at the possible internal injuries.

Just a few feet away, she could see Jonesin, Wolfman, and Cutter suffering from similar injuries. Like her, they were just beginning to regain consciousness.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the Warthog. It was crumpled up and laying on the ground like a discarded toy. There was simply no way that vehicle would ever run again.

"Situation report." Wolfman groaned, nursing a sprained wrist.

"I'm okay, but pretty banged up." Jonesin replied weakly.

"Same here." Cutter said.

"I think I need a bit of help here." Maya looked at her dislocated shoulder.

"I got it." Jonesin limped up to her. "This may be a little painful."

"Just do it."

Jonesin nodded and quickly popped Maya's shoulder back into its socket. Maya suppressed the urge to curse and scream from the pain.

"Okay, lets figure this out." Wolfman said. "It won't be long until pursuit finds us, and I'm pretty sure any chances of taking Finn's escape ship are FUBARed. That means we've got to get to Gotha and go to ground there. Hopefully we can elude whatever's left of Finn's commandos and find a way off this rock."

"That's a good idea." Cutter said, looking up the mountain. "Because I think we've got company."

The rest of the squad looked up to see a contingent of Scarlet Soldiers bearing down on them, their bright red armor standing in stark contrast to the woods around them.

Unfortunately, Maya had apparently lost her carbine in the fall, so the only weapon she had on hand was her sniper rifle. Though conditions were less than ideal, Maya was still very skilled with the rifle and managed to take down three soldiers as they tried to make their way down the steep cliff.

"Come on, lets go!" Wolfman yelled as he fired his carbine. "Fall back through the forest!"

The remains of the squad fell back as the pursuing soldiers fired on them. Even, with her injured leg, Maya still found the strength to run at full speed. She could feel the adrenaline surging through her veins, masking the pain.

Suddenly, several miles behind them, the entire mountain range imploded. It looked as if the entire mountain was lifted in the air by several feet, and then the entire structure collapsed in on itself as the base under it had all of its supports vaporized by the initial explosion.

Alarmed, the Scarlet Soldiers suddenly stopped their advance and turned to see the spectacle. This gave Maya and the others a chance to fall back and disappear into the forest.

Gotha

Meanwhile, in the nearby city of Gotha, the tremors from the distant explosion finally reached the city. Buildings shook, car alarms went off, windows shattered, and there was general panic all around. Most of the citizens, thinking that they were being struck by an earthquake, quickly ran for cover. The few that managed to get a good look at the distant mountains were shocked to see parts of the mountain range crumbling and collapsing into themselves, sending massive landslides down the slopes. Emergency services were swamped by the sudden cries and requests of the wounded and the panicked.

However, nobody in the madness bothered to take the time to wonder how such a catastrophe could have happened. As far as they were concerned, it was a freak act of nature.

Sobrai Mountains

Mogran gaped as he saw the mountain collapse. The bastards had decided to destroy the entire base rather than let it fall into his hands. What made things worse was that Mogran still had a number of men inside the base when it was destroyed.

"Sir, orders?" One of his men asked.

"Track the bastards down. Take no prisoners."

"Yes sir!"

Meanwhile, further down the mountain, Maya and her wounded squadmates struggled to try and gain as much distance between them and their pursuers. Unfortunately, the increasingly constant gunfire behind them meant that the Scarlet Soldiers were quickly catching up.

However, that wasn't their only problem. Maya felt an odd burning sensation in her chest. Suddenly remembering the odd crystal she was carrying, she quickly dug the box out of her pocket and gasped.

The rough handling and fall of the Warthog had cracked open the crystal's protective case, where its deadly radiation began to leak out. It was pretty much a done deal that she was irradiated with a lethal dose of radiation, and chances were good that it may have

spread to the rest of her squadmates.

"Wolfman, we have a problem."

Further up the mountain, Mogran and his men continued their pursuit. He looked up in the sky and noticed a golden band of light highlighting the horizon. It was almost morning, which would give his troops a serious advantage since they would be able to see better in daylight. In addition, his expected reinforcements should be linking up with him very soon. Once that happened, Mogran would have the manpower to encircle and trap the UNSC soldiers trying to escape.

"Shit. I believe that means we're not going anywhere then." Wolfman sighed as he inspected the cracked box. "I guess the best thing we can do is destroy this thing and suffer the joys of radiation poisoning."

At that moment, rifle rounds whizzed past as the Scarlet Soldiers began to catch up. Fortunately, there was a nearby barn that could afford them shelter. Maya and the remnants of the squad dashed inside, slamming the doors shut. The thin wooden walls wouldn't put up much resistance to a high velocity rifle round, but they were better than no cover at all.

"Cutter. Rig up anything you can on that artifact and this barn. If we can't find them off, we'll this on our terms."

Cutter, knowing that this was going to be their final stand, nodded and began bringing out the last of his explosives.

"Okay, Maya, Jonesin. You're with me. Let's show those sons of bitches why you don't mess with the UNSC." Wolfman loaded his rifle and took position on a nearby window.

Jonesin and Maya took similar positions. Maya aimed her sniper rifle at the woods ahead. She could see the muzzle flashes of individual soldier's weapons fire as they charged in. However, they were still several hundred yards away, too far for accurate fire from an assault rifle, but well within the reach of a sniper rifle. Plus, the flashes only served to make it easier to spot them. By the time the Scarlet Soldiers cleared the treeline and were in effective range of the barn, Maya had already fired twelve shots, felling just as many enemies.

At that point, Wolfman and Jonesin began firing as well. However, they were too few to hold off all of the soldiers outside, and the Scarlet Soldiers quickly achieved fire superiority, pinning down the squad and advancing. Suddenly, a machine gun burst ripped through the flimsy wooden walls, shredding through Maya's thigh and striking Cutter several times in the chest.

"Shit!" Wolfman cried. He tried to come to the aid of his wounded comrades, but was tied up with a knot of soldiers trying to break their way through the barn door.

Meanwhile, Maya was laying the ground, trying to stem the bleeding from her thigh. She looked over to Cutter who had fallen next to her. He was in a very bad shape too, with multiple holes in his upper chest armor and just as much blood coming out of them.

"Here's the trigger!" Cutter gasped as he handed a detonator to Maya.

Maya took it and noticed that Cutter had suddenly fallen silent. She looked again and saw him lying on the ground with an all-too familiar blank look in his open eyes.

However, Wolfman and Jonesin never realized that their comrade was dead. They were quickly and mercilessly cut down by massed assault rifle fire just seconds later. Maya tried getting up, but it was no good. She had just lost too much blood. She looked up, and with her fading vision, she could make out a grizzled old man standing over her.

"Just hand over what you stole from us," The man said, "and I promise we'll make it quick."

Maya stared blankly at the man, and then thought about her fallen comrades, both here and lost under the mountain.

"No." She said as she pressed the detonator.

Unknown

Maya's eyes snapped open for what seemed like just seconds later, and she found herself floating in a black void. She was beginning to wonder just where she was when a mysterious voice seemingly answered her thoughts.

"_Interesting. In destroying the Slipstone in such close proximity to yourself, you were squeezed into Slipspace along with the stone._"

Maya looked around, but could not see anybody.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"_I am called Scohar." _The voice answered, _"Normally, such conditions would have killed you, but you are incredibly fortunate._"

"What are you talking about?" Maya asked, dumbfounded.

"_You have the rare opportunity to see the universe beyond what your human senses are capable of._"

Maya felt that she had to ask the obvious question,
"Why?"

"_Unfortunately, my colleaguesâ€| have basked in their power for too long. They have become ignorant and overconfident, even in the face of an impending threat._"

"What does this have to do with me?"

"_I have been keeping a close eye on you, Maya Wellings. I know that when given the power, you will not abuse it. You have seen the excesses and sins of yourself and your race, yet you seek desperately to correct them._"

Maya had no answer to that.

"_If you decide to take my offer, you will understand. However, like all things, a price must be exacted."_

"I'm not liking the sound of this." Maya said.

"_Your price is that you must forsake everything that had previously tied you to the physical world. Your family will never know what has happened to you. You will eventually fade from the memories of everybody except for those closest to you. You will be introduced to a world where you will be met with criticism and mistrust from all sides. This is a grand game, where the stakes mean the difference between the life or death of the universe itself."_

Maya was silent. She didn't know what to do.

Undisclosed ONI facility

"It looks like everything went according to plan."

"Oh yes, everything went perfectly. It was a little more costly than I would have liked. Good special forces teams are hard to come by these days."

"What about Finn? It's quite obvious we've got some rogue elements."

"Unfortunately, there's not much we can do. If this were peacetime, I'd have them removed without a second thought. However, the people involved are incredibly good at what they do and if we are to win this war, we need men like them."

"I'm wondering sirâ€| what exactly did we get out of this? I mean, we lose a valuable asset and the chance to recover an alien artifact. What did we gain?"

"Information, of course. It's not going to be MAC cannons, nuclear warheads, or even Spartans that will determine the course of this war. The most powerful and most important weapon has and always will be information."

"You're not going to tell me, aren't you, sir?"

"Of course not. Dismissed."

AN: Hm, sorry if this chapter seemed a bit rushed, but my current college schedule has just been complete HELL, which of course affects my fic writing ability. It was partly that and also so I could get this little story arc DONE. Now I can concentrate on my other two fics. P

End
file.